Ethnic Diversity of the Roman Army at the Siege of Jerusalem (70 A.D.)

Overview

The army that Titus assembled to besiege Jerusalem in 70 A.D. was one of the most ethnically diverse military forces of the ancient world. Far from being a monolithic "Roman" force of Italians, it was overwhelmingly composed of Eastern provincial recruits—Syrians, Arabs, Egyptians, Anatolians, and others—commanded by a relatively thin layer of Roman-Italian officers. Two primary eyewitness and near-contemporary sources document its composition: Josephus (*Jewish War*, Books III and V) and Tacitus (*Histories*, Book V). Based on these sources and modern scholarly analysis, the force of approximately 60,000 combat troops drew personnel from at least 15 distinct ethnic or regional groups spanning three continents.[1][2]

Total Force Structure

Josephus records that "the whole army, including the auxiliaries sent by the kings, as well horsemen as footmen, when all were united together, amounted to sixty thousand". Modern estimates place the minimum at approximately 48,200 soldiers. The force was organized into three tiers:[3][1]

- **Four full legions** (~24,000 legionaries): Legio V Macedonica, Legio X Fretensis, Legio XII Fulminata, and Legio XV Apollinaris[2][1]
- **Detachments from two Egyptian legions**: Legio III Cyrenaica and Legio XXII Deiotariana[4]
- **Auxiliary and allied forces** (~36,000): Twenty cohorts of allied infantry, eight cavalry squadrons (*alae*), client king contingents,

Arab levies, and individual Roman/Italian adventurers[3][2]

The Four Legions and Their Recruitment Origins

By the late 60s A.D., legions stationed in the eastern provinces had undergone a dramatic shift in ethnic composition. Nigel Pollard of Oxford University, in *Soldiers, Cities, and Civilians in Roman Syria* (2000), documents two key findings: after the reign of Nero (68 A.D.), "legionaries of provincial birth outnumbered the Italians by about four or five to one" empire-wide, and "legions based in Cappadocia, Syria, and Egypt were made up of recruits from Asia Minor, Syria, and Egypt". Giovanni Forni's foundational study of tombstone inscriptions shows that Italian representation in the legions fell from ~62% under Augustus to ~50% under Claudius and Nero, and continued to decline sharply under the Flavians. By 70 A.D., the eastern legions were overwhelmingly staffed by local provincials.[5][6][7]

Legion	Home Base Before 70 A.D.	Primary Recruitment Regions	Modern Countries Represented
V Macedonica	Oescus, Moesia	Balkans (Moesia, Thrace); supplemented with eastern recruits en route	Serbia, Kosovo, Bulgaria, North Macedonia[8]
X Fretensis	Syria/Judea (since ~6 A.D.)	Syria, Judea; after 60+ years in-region, overwhelmingly local	Syria, Israel/Palestine[9][10]
XII Fulminata	Syria (Raphanaea)	Eastern Anatolia, Syria	Turkey, Syria[5]
XV Apollinaris	Syria (since 61 A.D.)	Originally Pannonia/Carnuntum, but by 70 A.D. mostly Syrian recruits	Syria (primarily), Austria (originally)[5][11]

Egyptian Detachments

Titus brought detachments from two legions garrisoned at Alexandria: the III Cyrenaica and the XXII Deiotariana. Tacitus specifies that Titus brought "some soldiers from the Twenty-second and the Third" from Alexandria. Josephus adds that Titus marched from Alexandria with 2,000 Alexandrian troops and 3,000 Euphrates (Mesopotamian) guards under Tiberius Julius Alexander.[12][5][4]

The III Cyrenaica had been stationed in Egypt since Augustus and recruited heavily from the Egyptian population. The XXII Deiotariana was originally raised in Galatia (central Anatolia/Turkey) but by this period also drew from Egyptian locals. The soldiers from these units represented:[13][14]

- **Egypt** (modern Egypt) — the majority of the Alexandrian detachments

- **Galatia/Central Turkey** — residual Galatian element in XXII Deiotariana
- **Mesopotamia/Iraq** — the 3,000 Euphrates guards[5]

Client King Auxiliaries

Josephus provides an unusually detailed enumeration of the allied contingents from four client kings:[3]

Client King	Kingdom	Troops Provided	Ethnic/Cultural Character	Modern Country
Antiochus IV	Commagene	1,000 foot archers + 1,000 cavalry	Greco-Persian-Armenian; spoke Greek, Armenian, Persian[15][16]	Southeastern Turkey (Adıyaman/Gaziantep provinces)
Agrippa II	Trachonitis, Batanaea, Gaulanitis	1,000 foot archers + 1,000 cavalry	Mixed: Hellenized Jews, Babylonian Jewish cavalry from Batanaea, Arabs, Greeks[17][18]	Israel/Palestine, Syria, Jordan (Golan Heights region)
Sohaemus	Emesa	1,000 foot archers + 1,000 cavalry	Arab-Aramaic; renowned archers; dynasty of Arab/Syrian origin[19][20]	Syria (modern Homs)
Malchus II	Nabataea	5,000 foot archers + 1,000 cavalry	Nabataean Arab; the largest single allied contingent[3]	Jordan, southern Syria, northern Saudi Arabia, Sinai

The Nabataean contribution was notably the largest at 6,000 troops—comprising 5,000 infantry (mostly archers) and 1,000 horsemen. Including all client-king forces, the allied contingents totaled approximately 12,000 men.[3]

Arab Levies and Syrian Irregulars

Beyond the formal client king contingents, Tacitus records "a strong contingent of Arabs, who hated the Jews with all that hatred that is common among neighbours". These Arab fighters operated as irregular forces separate from the Nabataean contingent of Malchus II. Josephus further notes that Syrian and Arab auxiliaries within the army were notorious for disemboweling Jewish refugees in search of swallowed gold. These levies likely drew from:[1][4]

- **Ituraea** (modern Lebanon/southern Syria) — Arab tribesmen from the Lebanon region
- **Various Arabian tribes** bordering Judea and the Transjordan
- **Syrian irregulars** — non-regular fighters from the Syrian countryside

Twenty Cohorts and Eight Cavalry Squadrons

Tacitus records "twenty cohorts of allied infantry, eight squadrons of cavalry" accompanying the legions. Josephus provides more numerical detail: ten cohorts of 1,000 men each and thirteen cohorts of 600 men each, with the larger cohorts having 120 horsemen attached. Five cohorts came from Caesarea and additional cavalry troops from Syria.[4][3]

The Caesarean cohorts were historically recruited from the Samaritan and Caesarean populations—the *Cohortes Sebastenorum* (from Sebaste/Samaria) are well-attested in the garrison of Judea. These auxiliary units represented:[21][22]

- **Samaria/Palestine** — Sebastenian (Samaritan) cohorts
- **Syria** — Syrian auxiliary infantry and cavalry
- **Thrace** (modern Bulgaria/Greece) — Thracian cavalry units were ubiquitous in the Roman East; of 32 known *sagittarii*

(archer) units in the 2nd century, 7 bore Thracian names[23]
- **Gaul** (modern France) — Gallic cavalry *alae* were stationed throughout the eastern provinces[24]
- **Hispania** (modern Spain) — Hispanic cohorts are attested in the eastern garrison system

Roman and Italian Personnel

Tacitus notes "many individual adventurers from Rome and Italy" who hoped to win Titus's favor "while he was yet free from engagements". The site Livius.org adds that veterans from the defeated armies of Galba and Otho also joined the expedition. However, this Italian contingent was small relative to the whole. The Roman officer corps—legates, tribunes, centurions, and prefects—was disproportionately Italian or from romanized western provinces, but constituted only a fraction of total personnel.[25][4]

Comprehensive List of Represented Regions

Drawing together all the evidence, the following modern countries and regions had significant representation in Titus's army:

#	Region/ People	Modern Country	Type of Troops	Estimated Share
1	Syria	Syria	Legionaries (X Fretensis, XII Fulminata, XV Apollinaris), auxiliaries, irregulars	30–40% [5]
2	Nabatean Arabia	Jordan, northern Saudi Arabia	Allied archers and cavalry (Malchus II)	10–12% [3]
3	Other Arab Tribes	Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Sinai	Irregular Arab levies	5–8% [4]
4	Judea/Samaria	Israel/Palestine	Sebastenian cohorts, Agrippa's forces	5–7% [21] [17]
5	Egypt	Egypt	Legionary detachments (III Cyrenaica, XXII Deiotariana)	3–5% [14] [12]
6	Commagene	Southeastern Turkey	Allied archers and cavalry (Antiochus IV)	2–3% [15]
7	Eastern Anatolia	Turkey (Cappadocia, Galatia)	Legionaries (XII Fulminata), XXII Deiotariana origin	3–5% [5]
8	Emesa	Syria (Homs region)	Allied archers and cavalry (Sohaemus)	2–3% [19]
9	Moesia/ Balkans	Serbia, Kosovo, Bulgaria, North Macedonia	Legionaries (V Macedonica)	5–8% [8]

#	Region/ People	Modern Country	Type of Troops	Estimated Share
10	Thrace	Bulgaria, northern Greece	Auxiliary cavalry and archers	2–3% [23]
11	Italy/Rome	Italy	Officers, adventurers, veterans of Galba/Otho	5–8% [4] [25]
12	Mesopotamia	Iraq	Euphrates guards (3,000 men)	3–5% [5]
13	Phoenicia/Lebanon	Lebanon	Berytus veterans, Ituraean irregulars	1–2%
14	Gaul	France	Gallic auxiliary cohorts	1–2% [24]
15	Hispania	Spain	Hispanic auxiliary cohorts	<1%
16	Idumaean/Transjordan	Jordan (southern)	Mixed local auxiliaries	<1%
17	Trachonitis/Batanaea	Syria/Jordan (Golan/Hauran)	Agrippa II's Babylonian-Jewish cavalry	1–2% [18]

Estimated Ethnic Breakdown

Synthesizing the evidence from Josephus, Tacitus, Pollard, and Forni, the approximate ethnic composition of Titus's forces can be estimated as follows:

- **Syrian/Aramaic peoples**: 30–40% — the single largest ethnic group, dominating three of the four legions and many auxiliary cohorts[5]

- **Arab peoples** (Nabataean, Ituraean, and other tribes): 18–25% — the Nabataean contingent alone was 6,000+, supplemented by Tacitus's "strong contingent" of irregular Arabs[4][3]
- **Balkan/European provincials** (Moesian, Thracian, Gallic, Hispanic): 8–12% — primarily from Legio V Macedonica and Thracian/Gallic auxiliary units[8][24]
- **Egyptian**: 3–5% — from the Alexandrian legionary detachments[14]
- **Anatolian/Turkish** (Commagenian, Galatian, Cappadocian): 5–8% — from Commagene's allied contingent and eastern Anatolian legionary recruits[15][5]
- **Judean/Samaritan**: 5–7% — Sebastenian cohorts and Agrippa's mixed forces[17][21]
- **Mesopotamian/Iraqi**: 3–5% — Euphrates guards[5]
- **Italian/Roman**: 5–8% — officers, adventurers, and the residual Italian minority in the legions[7][4]

The combined Eastern/Middle Eastern component (Syrian, Arab, Egyptian, Anatolian, Judean, Mesopotamian) thus constituted roughly **75–85%** of the total force, with Western/European personnel (Italian, Balkan, Gallic, Hispanic) making up only **15–25%**.[6][5]

Key Qualifications

These percentage estimates carry inherent uncertainty. Epigraphic evidence (tombstone inscriptions) is the primary basis for determining legionary origins, and this evidence is incomplete. Furthermore, the distinction between "Syrian" and "Arab" was often blurred in the ancient sources, and many soldiers of mixed heritage defy simple ethnic categorization. The auxiliary cohorts are particularly difficult to trace, as their ethnic character could change over decades of local recruitment even when retaining original ethnic unit names. Nevertheless, the scholarly consensus—anchored in Pollard, Forni, and the primary accounts of Josephus and Tacitus—firmly establishes that the army that besieged Jerusalem was overwhelmingly drawn from the peoples of the Eastern Mediterranean and the Near East.[26][7][5]

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